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**NAVAL WAR COLLEGE
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“The Results Would Justify Severe Loss”:

The Dardanelles Naval Assault of 1915 & Operational Art

by

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**A paper submitted to the Faculty of the Naval War College in partial satisfaction of the
requirements of the Department of Joint Military Operations.**

**The contents of this paper reflect my own personal views and are not necessarily endorsed by
the Naval War College or the Department of the Navy.**

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Abstract

The failed Anglo-Franco naval assault on Turkish fortifications at the Dardanelles on 18 March 1915 poses one of the greatest “What ifs?” in the history of warfare. Success could have knocked Turkey out of World War I and opened lines of communication to Russia. This paper examines the historical and strategic background behind the Dardanelles operation. It also examines the British command structure and the process by which the Dardanelles was selected as an alternate target to the Western Front. Finally, the paper analyzes the various facets of operational design and how the failure of operational art prevented the British from clearly articulating their strategic objectives and from translating those objectives into operational and tactical success.

INTRODUCTION

It was just before 1400 in the afternoon on 18 March 1915 off Turkey's rugged Gallipoli Peninsula. World War I had entered its 8th month. Admiral John de Robeck was pleased with the progress of the 13 battleships in his combined Anglo-Franco squadron. The ships had been shelling the Turkish forts for the better part of the day. While it had been difficult to gage the effectiveness of the bombardment, the return fire from Turkish artillery had been desultory and inaccurate.

At 1354, as the 2nd Division of battleships turned to starboard to allow the 3rd Division to move forward, the French pre-dreadnought *Bouvet* suddenly exploded. In less than two minutes the stricken vessel capsized and sank, taking almost her entire complement with her to the bottom. Thinking the loss had come from a lucky shell fired from one of the forts, de Robeck continued with the operation. In fact, his ships had strayed into a previously unknown minefield.

By the end of the day, the British pre-dreadnoughts *Irresistible* and *Ocean* had struck mines and joined *Bouvet* on the bottom. The French *Gaulois* and British battlecruiser *Inflexible* were both forced to beach to avoid sinking.

De Robeck had seen enough. By 1800 he had signaled his forces to withdraw. The great naval assault to reach Constantinople and force Turkey from the war was over. De Robeck would not venture another effort to run the Dardanelles with naval forces alone. Within six weeks, the Australian-New Zealand Army Corps (ANZAC) would land at Gallipoli and what had been conceived as an alternative to the meat-grinder of the Western Front would devolve into a deadly eight-month long stalemate that resulted in nearly 500,000 combined casualties.¹

De Robeck's naval assault stands as one of history's great —What Ifs?" If de Robeck had been able to put his fleet before Constantinople, would that have knocked Turkey out of the war?

¹ Moorehead, *Gallipoli*, p. 361

With Turkey neutralized and the line of communications to the Black Sea restored, would Russia have remained in the war? And would that in turn have precluded the Bolshevik Revolution?

The Gallipoli Campaign, especially the naval assault of 18 March 1915, involved some of the greatest figures in British history, most notably Lord Herbert Kitchener (of the iconic “Your Country Needs You” recruiting posters) and Winston Churchill. The campaign has been endlessly analyzed and debated. With regards to the naval assault alone, the opinions range from the wholly negative with an invocation of Nelson’s adage that “A sailor who attacked a fort was a fool” to the positive, insisting that “If there had been a Farragut in command of the Allied fleet in the Dardanelles the passage to Constantinople would have been forced.”²

In either view, whether of the sound concept poorly managed or bad idea that never stood a chance, all parties acknowledge that the British did an astoundingly poor job of planning and executing the Dardanelles operation. This paper will examine the idea that a more competent application of operational art would have resulted in a more informed and prepared naval force commander who could then have seized his Farragut moment and changed the course of history.

BACKGROUND

Britain and the Dardanelles

The British Empire was no stranger to the narrow strategic waterway that connects the Aegean Sea to the Sea of Marmara and separates Europe from Asia Minor. In the fall of 1806, the Russians applied to their British allies of the anti-Napoleonic France Fourth Coalition for a naval demonstration to divert Turkish forces to free the Czar’s troops for service in Germany.

The famed Sir Sidney Smith opined that “a line of battleships alone [will] have weight in the minds of the inhabitants of the Seraglio, and the nearest will ever be obeyed.”³ With the British

² McPherson, *The Strategy of the Great War*, p. 179

³ Higgins, *Winston Churchill & The Dardanelles*, p. 3

Ambassador to the Sublime Porte seconding Smith's optimistic prediction of Turkish capitulation under the gun ports of the Royal Navy, the Admiralty approved the scheme with the observation that the effort would "require much ability and firmness in the officer who is to command it."⁴

This officer of "much ability and firmness" was Vice Admiral Sir John Duckworth, and he was hurried on his way with the admonishment that the Turks with the assistance of French engineers were rapidly transforming the Dardanelles into an impassable deathtrap. Whatever Duckworth's initial ardor, bad weather and the realization of what he was up against made the good admiral balk at his assignment. Even so, he was able to run the strait on 19 February 1807 and enter the Sea of Marmara. At that point, the winds failed, and the fleet never did reach Constantinople. Despite Sir Sidney's pleadings, Duckworth realized that the Turks were not about to be panicked into a surrender, so he beat a hasty retreat before the Ottomans could finish their fortifications on Gallipoli and bar his ships from escaping.

The failure of the expedition met with outrage in Britain, but an unabashed Duckworth flatly stated, "I must, as an officer, declare it to be my decided opinion that, without the cooperation of a body of land forces, it would be a wanton sacrifice of the squadrons...to attempt to force the passage."⁵

By July 1807 Czar Alexander I and Napoleon met on a raft in the River Neman to sign the Peace of Tilsit that left Britain almost alone in the fight against France. Some observers believe the British failure at the Dardanelles may have been a factor in Alexander's decision to withdraw from the Fourth Coalition and join forces with France.⁶

In the following years, other British officials would have cause to assess the Dardanelles. In 1890, Admiral Anthony Hoskins, Commander-in-Chief of the Mediterranean Fleet observed,

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Ibid., p. 5

⁶ Ibid.

If...the Turkish batteries and gunners are fairly efficient, such an attempt would in all probability end in disaster and even if by a rush past at night the squadron succeeded in reaching the Sea of Marmara without serious injury, its position will be hazardous in the extreme.”⁷

Just prior to the start of the Great War, the Dardanelles question was constantly revisited with the Army General Staff dryly noting in December 1907 that “unaided action by the Fleet, bearing in mind the risks involved [was] much to be deprecated.”⁸

Turkey Enters The Great War

In the years prior to World War I, Great Britain and Germany both vied for advantage with Enver Pasha and the Young Turks who had pushed aside the Ottoman Sultan Abdul Hamid II in 1909. While the Germans offered assistance to modernize the Turkish Army in the wake of the disastrous Balkan Wars, the British did likewise for the decrepit Turkish Navy. This naval assistance later would have unfortunate political consequences.

Upon commencement of hostilities in August 1914, First Lord of the Admiralty Winston Churchill ordered the commandeering of two nearly complete battleships intended for Turkey. The seizure obviously strengthened the Royal Navy, but it also denied modern naval assets to the German-leaning Turks. Sensing an easy political and military victory, Germany thoughtfully offered the Turks, outraged all the more because the absconded dreadnoughts had been patriotically funded in part by public subscription, the services of two cruisers, *Goeben* and *Breslau*, and their crews to make good the loss of the British-built ships. In a dramatic game of hide-and-seek in the Mediterranean, the German cruisers eluded the Allied fleets and scampered into the Dardanelles on 10 August 1914. To preserve the fiction of Turkish neutrality, *Goeben* and *Breslau* were re-

⁷ Ibid., p.7

⁸ Ibid., p. 10

commissioned respectively as *Yavuz Sultan Selim* and *Midilli*. In comic opera fashion, the German crews donned fezzes and “joined” the Turkish Navy.⁹

The war itself came shortly thereafter to the eastern Mediterranean. The two cruisers in company with Turkish torpedo boats sortied and attacked the Russian Black Sea ports of Sevastopol and Odessa on 28 October. France and Britain issued an immediate ultimatum demanding that the Turks discharge the two German cruisers.

Though the formal British declaration of war on Turkey did not come until 5 November, on 1 November without consulting the War Council, First Lord Churchill directed the British squadron under Admiral Sir Sackville Hamilton Carden to bombard the outer fortifications guarding the entrance to the Dardanelles at Sedd-el-Bahr. Much later, this uncoordinated assault was lamely justified by Churchill as a test to learn the effective range of Turkish guns.¹⁰ The attack, which occurred on 3 November, obliterated the fortifications, but also served notice to the Turks as to the vulnerability of British interest in the Dardanelles. As Admiral Bacon put it, “the bombardment of the outer forts...was an act of sheer lunacy.”¹¹ It was the first mistake of the ill-starred campaign.

Genesis of the Campaign

At the first meeting of the War Council on 25 November 1914, Churchill first broached the idea of a Dardanelles operation, as a riposte to a developing Turkish attack on the Sinai. The suggestion was quickly dismissed.

However, a mere five weeks later, four separate communiqés would appear over the course of a week that would breathe life into Churchill’s idea.

The first was the remarkable ‘Boxing Day Memorandum’ circulated on 28 December by Lord Maurice Hankey, Secretary of the War Council. Beginning with the observation that “the

⁹ Moorehead, p. 28

¹⁰ Dardanelles Commission, p. 14

¹¹ Bacon & McMurtie, *Modern Naval Strategy*, p. 123

remarkable deadlock which has occurred in the western theatre of war invites consideration of the question whether some other outlet can be found for the effective employment of the great forces of which we shall be able to dispose in a few months' time," Hankey set forth numerous tactical and strategic proposals.¹² Hankey concluded by suggesting Turkey was the best target to get at Germany, and that Turkey was best attacked at the Dardanelles in conjunction with France, Greece and Bulgaria.¹³

The second communication came from Churchill. Like Hankey, he eschewed the western front with the poetic query, —Are there not other alternatives than our armies to chew barbed wire in Flanders?"¹⁴ Abandoning his original suggestion of the Dardanelles, the First Lord now fixed his gaze on an amphibious assault on Schleswig-Holstein.

Not to be outdone, the Chancellor of the Exchequer, David Lloyd George, issued his own memo a few days later, also wishing to avoid the western trenches. He would later rhetorically ask Churchill, —Are we really bound to hand over the ordering of our troops to France as if we were her vassal?"¹⁵ Lloyd George's strategic idea was to land troops in Salonika to support the Greeks in a move against Austria-Hungary with a supporting operation against the Turks in Syria.

The final communication was the most portentous. In an echo of the 1807 campaign, on 2 January 1915, Grand Duke Nicholas, commander of the Russian Army, issued a plea for the British to create a diversion to alleviate Turkish pressure in the Caucasus. Though Kitchener was dubious that anything could be done, he nevertheless immediately committed the British to action.

This series of communications led to a welter of strategic proposals that ultimately resulted in the decision to attack the Dardanelles at a War Council meeting on 13 January 1915.

¹² Hankey, *The Supreme Command*, p. 245

¹³ Ibid., p. 248-249

¹⁴ Koss, *Asquith*, p. 171

¹⁵ Hazlehurst, *Politicians at War: July 1914 to May 1915*, p. 191

BRITISH COMMAND STRUCTURE

The War Council

Before proceeding any further, it is essential to understand the structure of British strategic decision making. At the onset of the Great War in August 1914, the entire British Cabinet was considered to be responsible for the conduct of the war. The Cabinet was to be assisted in this process by the Committee of Imperial Defence. The system was soon to be judged unwieldy with 21 members, many of whose ministerial duties had nothing to do with the conduct of the war.

On 25 November this pre-war system was abandoned and replaced with a War Council initially comprised of seven members (see Table 1, p. 20).

In addition to these seven ministers, various military experts such as the First Sea Lord and Chief of the Imperial General Staff were expected to be in attendance to offer their technical advice to the civilian members of the Council. The role of these military experts was unclear and would later haunt the entire basis of the Dardanelles effort.

Of special note were the two dominating personalities representing the military offices: Lord Herbert Kitchener as Secretary of State of War and Winston Churchill as First Lord of the Admiralty. Prime Minister Herbert Asquith, while notionally the head of the Council, in reality acted more as *primus inter pares* and not as a strong executive leader. It is commonplace to regard Asquith as a brilliant parliamentarian, a man of honour and dignity but lacking in creative vision and temperamentally unsuited to the exigencies of war leadership. True he had none of the dynamism and resourcefulness of the elder Pitt. In cabinet, he continued the peace-time practice of leisurely discussion, frequently allowing matters requiring rapid decision to drag on.¹⁶

Despite the introduction of the War Council system, many quickly noted that it was little different than the previous. One minister observed, "You do not get discussions in the War Council

¹⁶ Cassar, *Asquith as War Leader*, p. 233-234

differing materially from those in the cabinet.”¹⁷ The Earl of Crewe was even more critical: –The political members did too much talking, and the expert members too little.”¹⁸

The Admiralty

Notionally, the Board of Admiralty was comprised of the First Lord (a political appointee and member of the Cabinet), four Sea Lords, two Civil Lords, and two secretaries. The role of the Board was historically uncertain and confused, but early in the war it had already been supplanted by the War Staff Group.

By the time Turkey entered the war, the Admiralty in general, and First Lord Churchill specifically, were under siege. Great victories had been expected of the Royal Navy. Instead cruisers and battleships were being sunk at an alarming rate by new weapons such as mines and submarine-launched torpedoes. German commerce raiders had run amok on the high seas, making a mockery of any British pretenses to owning the waves. Even more troubling was news from the coast of Chile that a cruiser squadron had been utterly routed by the Germans at Coronel on 1 November, the first defeat of the Royal Navy in over a century.

While enduring criticisms for these various naval setbacks, Churchill was personally distracted by two major crises. The first occurred when he insinuated himself into the defense of the Belgian port of Antwerp in early October 1914. Not only did Churchill send his pet project, the half-trained Naval Division, into the fray, but upon arrival in the port to inspect its defenses, he quixotically offered his resignation as First Lord to take command of the forces present. Even more farcically, –Kitchener expressed the willingness to make Churchill a lieutenant general”¹⁹ before Prime Minister Asquith ordered Churchill home from the front. Whatever Churchill’s motivations, the gesture immediately called his already much-doubted naval acumen into question. Captain

¹⁷ Koss, p. 171

¹⁸ James, *Gallipoli*, p. 24

¹⁹ Cassar, *Kitchener: Architect of Victory*, p. 245

Herbert Richmond, a member of the Admiralty Staff, sourly noted in his diary that it was –a tragedy that the Navy should be in such lunatic hands at this time.”²⁰

The second distraction involved the incumbent First Sea Lord at the onset of the war, Prince Louis of Battenberg. Born in Austria, he was of minor German nobility, though without dynastic rights. Despite his faithful and exemplary service to the Crown, he could not escape the rampant anti-German sentiment of the time and was forced to resign on 27 October.

To fill this void, Churchill selected previously retired First Sea Lord Admiral John Jackie‘ Fisher, famed for his energy and innovative spirit that resulted in the revolutionary warship HMS *Dreadnought*. It was a shrewd, but dangerous move on Churchill’s part. Fisher’s appointment would quell criticisms that the Admiralty was run by incompetents, but as Lord Beaverbrook noted, –Churchill co-opted Fisher to relieve the pressure against himself, but he had no intention of letting anyone else rule the roost. Here, then, were two strong men of incompatible tempers both bent on autocracy. It only required a difference of opinion on policy to produce a clash, and this cause of dissensions was not long wanting.”²¹

The War Office

While perhaps not filled with the same drama as the Admiralty, the situation in the War Office was also unsatisfactory, but for different reasons. The first issue was —the general staff however were allowed to leave the country [Britain] at the heels of the expeditionary force.”²²

The departure of the officers of the General Staff was indicative of a mindset prevalent throughout the British command structure. –But on the higher plane of war direction practically nothing existed and absolutely nothing had been designed...It arose from a false assumption concerning the duration of a European war and a refusal to face the prospect of raising and

²⁰ Marder, *Portrait of an Admiral: The Life & Papers of Sir Herbert Richmond*, p. 111

²¹ Beaverbrook, *Politicians and the War 1914-1916*, p. 105

²² Fraser, *Lord Esher: A Political Biography*, p. 260

deploying on a global scale the huge national army that did emerge and for which a war directorate was indispensable.”²³

This lack of advanced planning would later lead Sir Ian Hamilton, eventual commander of the Gallipoli landing force, to complain: —To long years of General Staff...; where are your well-thought-out schemes for an amphibious attack on Constantinople? Not a sign. The Dardanelles and Bosphorus might be in the moon for all the military information I have to go upon.”²⁴

However, unlike the Admiralty, with a civilian leader and soon to be riven by an intense personality conflict, the War Office was of one voice. That voice was Field Marshal the Earl Herbert Kitchener, hero of Omdurman and the Boer War. His fame as a soldier brought great credibility to the Asquith government and served as a steady influence early in the war.

However, this credibility came at the price of Kitchener’s unquestioned dominance of military affairs in the deliberations of the War Council and subversion of the army staff system. Serving as Chief of the Imperial General Staff was Lieutenant General Sir James Wolfe Murray. In reality, according to Wolfe Murray, —Lord Kitchener acted very much as his own Chief of Staff.”²⁵

It was Kitchener’s unchallenged refusal to provide land forces that led to the decision to attempt to force the Dardanelles with ships alone.

The Royal Navy in the Mediterranean

While the higher command in London was in some disarray, there was a total absence of operational leadership in the Mediterranean. Given the historical importance Great Britain placed on the Mediterranean and the fact that half of her food imports passed through those waters²⁶, this may

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Asprey, —Gallipoli”, p. 58-59

²⁵ Dardanelles Commission, *First Report*, p. 6

²⁶ Halpern, *The Mediterranean Naval Situation 1908-1914*, p. 1

seem rather surprising. However, this situation can be traced to the German *Novelle*, published in 1912 that launched the naval building race prior to the war.

Faced with Germany rapidly arming itself with modern dreadnoughts, Britain began to shift its naval dispositions to bring its forces closer to home waters. Churchill's naval reorganization later in 1912 had the Mediterranean Fleet shifting from Malta to Gibraltar and being considered the 4th Battle Squadron of the 1st Fleet, ready to race to protect British shores at a moment's notice.

The Entente Cordiale between France and Britain in 1904 also contributed to the further weakening of British power in the Mediterranean, as it was expected that the French fleet could hold against the Austrian and Italian navies. The British and French admiralties also concluded the F.010 (Joint Action in the Mediterranean), but —~~th~~ agreement was rather vague on details.²⁷

Upon commencement of hostilities, Admiral Milne, the Mediterranean Fleet commander-in-chief was recalled to home, and his office disestablished. Admiral Carden, as senior officer remaining at Malta, was left to command the remaining forces and would report directly to London. The Dardanelles mission would go forward without an operational level commander.

OPERATIONAL DESIGN

The lack of a true operational commander greatly hampered British efforts at the Dardanelles. As will be shown, the uncertain strategic aims of the authorities in London were left to be translated into action by a tactical commander in the field.

Desired Strategic End State

In the design of a campaign, the desired strategic end state is —~~a~~ key prerequisite for determining method, duration, and intensity in applying one's sources of military and non-military power to accomplish a given military or theater strategic objective.²⁸ For the British, there was

²⁷ Halpern, *Naval War in the Mediterranean*, p. 5

²⁸ Vego, *Joint Operational Warfare*, p. IX-84

never a clearly defined end state. In part, this was a natural result of the deficiencies of the War Council system. However, it also reflected the philosophical split within the British establishment between the Continental and Maritime schools.

The former believed that victory lay in employing British forces on the continent, specifically France, and sought the total defeat of Germany. The latter wished to revert to what they saw as Britain's traditional strategy of using its naval power to choose peripheral theaters to attack the enemy. In his Boxing Day Memorandum, Hankey summarized this position by stating, "In our previous continental wars, when we have found ourselves unable to inflict a direct defeat on our enemy in his own country, we have frequently resorted to diversions against his territory oversea, thus getting into our possession assets to barter against his successes on the Continent of Europe when the arrangements of peace come to be discussed."²⁹

In between these two positions was Churchill. "First, he wished to create a strategy that would be a synthesis of the continental and the maritime-peripheral schools; the second was that Germany must be defeated totally and there must be no compromise peace."³⁰

The tension between these positions was never resolved, and, as a result, the Dardanelles operation was allowed to drift from low-cost maritime diversion to full-involvement continental commitment of land forces. Whether the presence of an operational level commander could have spanned this gap is debatable, but it certainly could not have hurt the situation.

Strategic Objective

On 3 January 1915, the Admiralty sent the following message to Admiral Carden, commanding the squadron guarding the approaches to the Dardanelles:

Do you think it is a practicable operation to force the Dardanelles by the use of ships alone?

²⁹ Hankey, p. 247-248

³⁰ Ben-Moshe, *Churchill's Strategic Conception during the First World War*, p. 6

It is assumed that older battleships would be employed, that they would be furnished with mine sweepers and that they would be preceded by colliers or other merchant vessels as sweepers and bumpers.

The importance of the results would justify severe loss. Let me know what your views are.³¹

It is worthy of note that no objective was assigned to Carden other than forcing the strait.

Further, –the local commander, who had little knowledge of the Dardanelles defences, was being invited to give his views on a matter of high policy.”³² Perhaps it was assumed that the only logical objective to be had from forcing the Dardanelles was Constantinople. However, this omission was significant as it was the first tangible manifestation of the uncertain desired end state and would have further negative consequences.

Operational Objectives

Two days later on 5 January, undeterred by the lack of a clearly stated objective, Carden replied to the Admiralty’s request:

I do not think that the Dardanelles can be rushed, but they might be forced by extended operations with a large number of ships.³³

The next day the Admiralty replied:

High authorities here concur in your opinion.

Forward detailed particulars showing what force would be required for extended operations. How do you think it would be employed, and what results could be gained?³⁴

It would take Carden another five days to respond to this request. At that time he laid before the Admiralty several courses of actions and the forces required (see Appendix 1, p. 22). It is interesting to note that in Carden’s menu of options, Constantinople, the true operational objective,

³¹ Frothingham, *The Naval History of the World War: Offensive Operations 1914-1915*, p. 246

³² James, p. 28

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ Ibid.

is not mentioned. And, thus, because the strategic objective had not been clearly defined, Carden's chosen tactical objectives irrevocably altered the original conception of the mission. The originally intended demonstration to aid the Russians that had become a low-cost lightning strike to knock the Turks from the war had now become a lengthy endeavor that would irrevocably commit British prestige in the Mediterranean, and all of this had come about because the tactical commander lacked proper operational and strategic guidance.

Identification of Critical Factors & Enemy/Friendly Strategic Centers of Gravity

While this paper only references a very small number of the British communications and plans surrounding the Dardanelles operation, one element of campaign design stands out most notably for its absence: mention of the Turkish forces as an active opposing part of the campaign. There is much talk of forcing straits and technical artillery issues, but little discussion of what the Turks would do, as if they were merely another geographic feature to be overcome. One historian asserts that —the campaign was begun as if it was to be no more than a large-scale punitive expedition against a recalcitrant native regime and not against a serious military power.”³⁵

As such, any British analysis of critical factors and centers of gravity was probably desultory at best. Churchill would argue in 1917 that —the arrival of any portion of the Fleet before Constantinople would have produced revolution and put Turkey out of the war.”³⁶

While the failure to conduct this analysis is inexcusable and no doubt contributed in part to the failure of the Dardanelles campaign, in fairness it must be noted that the Turks had just retreated after a half-hearted offensive against Egypt. Further reinforcing this attitude was an absurd episode in December 1914 at Alexandretta, Syria where the Turks destroyed military stores on compulsion

³⁵ French, “The Origins of the Dardanelles Campaign Reconsidered”, p. 210

³⁶ Ibid.

by a British cruiser, which had to lend the Turks the explosives and a gunnery officer (who was briefly commissioned into the Turkish Navy for appearances sake) to do the job.³⁷

Requirements for Sources of Military & Non-military Power

The determination of forces required for the Dardanelles did not flow from a proper analysis of the relationship between the strategic objective and the Turkish center of gravity. The initial absence of ground forces resulted from an arbitrary and unchallenged decision by Kitchener.

Intent on doing something to burnish the Navy's reputation and always hungry for action, Churchill seized upon the opportunity presented by the Russian request for assistance and Kitchener's refusal to commit the Army to pursue the attack with naval forces alone.³⁸

Initial Geo-strategic Position

The British attack clearly operated along exterior lines. Exterior lines —require the employment of relatively large forces..., but they demand greater speed of movement and agility from the operational commander. The commander has to act with initiative."³⁹

As has been shown, the British actions were slow and clumsy with a plodding operational concept that allowed the Turks to take full advantage of their interior lines. When the Dardanelles operation was first proposed, Fisher himself emphatically declared, "CONSIDER THE ATTACK ON TURKEY HOLDS THE FIELD! BUT ONLY IF IT'S IMMEDIATE!" He prophetically added, "However, it won't be!"⁴⁰

Operational Idea (Scheme)

As mentioned above, the lack of clear guidance and firm leadership from the Admiralty and War Council allowed Carden's operational idea of methodically destroying the Turkish forts and

³⁷ Ibid., p. 217

³⁸ Cassar, *Kitchener*, p. 272

³⁹ Vego, p. IX-94

⁴⁰ Moorehead, p. 36

clearing minefields before proceeding to Constantinople to change the entire character of British strategy in the eastern Mediterranean. What had originally been conceived of as an economy-of-force lighting strike became a bleeding ulcer that eventually toppled the Asquith government.

Strategic/Operational Direction/Axis

Hankey's original conception of the Dardanelles assault was a part of a multi-prong campaign against the Turks with the cooperation of the armies of Britain, France, Greece, Serbia, and Bulgaria.⁴¹ Unfortunately, British diplomacy was not up to the task of handling the prickly Balkan nations, and Kitchener balked at providing troops.

Thus, the British effort was reduced to a single, predictable axis against an enemy that already had advance warning of their interest and plenty of time to reinforce a position that was geographically daunting on its face. The presence of an operational commander may have allowed for the use of operational fires and deception to at least attempt to confuse the Turks as to the true intentions of the British attack.

Balancing Operational Factors versus Strategic Objectives

To reach their implied strategic objective of Constantinople, the British well recognized their disadvantage in the factor of space, represented by the Dardanelles with its swift currents, treacherous weather, and numerous fortifications. They attempted to offset this spatial disadvantage with a sizeable force of battleships with guns that could outrange the Turkish artillery pieces.

However, the British never seemed to grasp that the factor of time also worked against them as the Turks with German engineering assistance improved their forts and sowed the waters with naval mines. The Turks also reinforced Gallipoli with entrenched infantry, in case the British did try a combined arms assault, and mobile artillery.

⁴¹ Hankey, p. 248

The original conception of running the strait was probably the optimal balance of force and time against space. Carden's operational scheme of reducing the forts left the British in a position where time and space worked against their superior naval forces. This was typified by the dismal circle where battleships could not closely approach the forts without having the mines swept, but the mines could not be swept without battleships approaching close enough to neutralize the forts.

Operational Sustainment

While the British did have the use of Lemnos Island, less than 50 kilometers from the entrance to the Dardanelles, no plan was ever developed that addressed how the warships that successfully forced the Straits would be supplied. It must be presumed the ships that did survive the run would have expended some ammunition and then would have been required to confront the two German cruisers along with elements of the Turkish Navy.

Along with the assumption that the mere presence of British warships before Constantinople would topple the government was the equally optimistic hope that the Turkish forces on the Gallipoli peninsula would quit their positions once the Royal Navy had run the Dardanelles. To this point Churchill testified to the Dardanelles Commission that –incidents are very frequent in history especially among Mahomedan or native troops, where the advance of a naval force or flotilla along a river or a waterway behind the positions which these troops are holding, have (*sic*) led to a general retreat and evacuation even when the line of supply was not completely cut.”⁴²

COUNTER-ARGUMENTS

While no one would argue that the operational design of the Dardanelles attack should not have been improved, there are two schools of thought that would argue this improvement would have ultimately been irrelevant.

⁴² French, p. 219

Good Idea, Bad Execution

The first argument holds that –the strategy of the Dardanelles campaign was eminently sound... The fault was not in the plan, but in the execution.”⁴³ This school of thought especially holds the local commanders responsible for failure of nerve, the failure, as described in the Introduction, to be a Farragut.

At the start of the war, Carden was the superintendent of the Malta dockyard and already in poor health. His successor, de Robeck had been on half-pay status. Admiral Bacon summed the problem up thusly, –Unfortunately, the initial operations were confided to the man who chanced to be on the spot, in many ways an excellent officer, but without the special qualifications necessary for exceptional work.”⁴⁴ Of de Robeck, Churchill wrote, –One could not feel that his training and experience [...] had led him to think deeply on the larger aspects of strategy and tactics.”⁴⁵

Rebuttal

It probably cannot be argued that either Carden or de Robeck were the men of –much ability and firmness” required for such a bold stroke, especially when, nearer at hand was Rear Admiral Arthur Limpus, head of the naval mission to Constantinople, who was intimately familiar with the Turkish defenses.⁴⁶ Nevertheless, a better application of operational design would have at the very least left the tactical commander with a stronger understanding of the ultimate objective of the operation and thus a better sense of what would constitute acceptable casualties in such a situation.

Bad Idea...Period

The second argument is that the Dardanelles naval attack was a bad idea from the start and doomed to failure. While there are many sub-variations of this argument ranging from technical

⁴³ McPherson, p. 179

⁴⁴ Bacon, p. 123

⁴⁵ James, p. 59

⁴⁶ Higgins, p. 54

details of artillery to the political situation in Constantinople, Fisher probably sums it up best by stating, –We play into Germany’s hands if we risk fighting ships in any subsidiary operations such as coastal bombardments or the attack of fortified places without military cooperation.”⁴⁷

Rebuttal

Adherents to the –bad idea” school typically assert that ships should not engage fortifications. However, they fail to acknowledge that the plan submitted by Carden on 11 January was a gross departure from the original, even if vaguely understood, concept behind the Dardanelles. The point was to move past the fortifications as quickly as possible and get to Constantinople. Churchill’s query to Carden on 3 January had the correct formulation when he stated –the results would justify severe loss.” Unfortunately, the failure of operational design and the absence of an operational level commander allowed the initial bold idea to be corrupted by an uninformed tactical commander.

CONCLUSION

The Dardanelles naval assault of 18 March 1915 revealed numerous flaws throughout the British war apparatus at all levels, military and civilian, tactical, operational and strategic. In retrospect, a daring tactical concept with immense strategic import not just failed, but actually brought about a situation that it was meant to avoid in the first place, that being a massive commitment of forces with resultant heavy casualties.

While a better application of operational art may not have overcome many of the issues plaguing the British command structure, it would have ensured a better translation of their strategic goals into an operational plan which would have in turn led to a better informed tactical commander.

“And so it is possible that Great Britain might have made a decisive contribution to the strategy of 1915, if the Cabinet had made up their minds in January what they meant by an attack on the Dardanelles and how it was to be brought to a conclusion... ”⁴⁸

⁴⁷ James, p. 36

⁴⁸ Cruttwell, *The Role of British Strategy in the Great War*, p. 40

Table 1

Membership of the Asquith War Council

<i>Member</i>	<i>Position</i>	<i>Associated Military</i>
Herbert Asquith	Prime Minister	
Winston Churchill	First Lord of the Admiralty	First Sea Lord Fisher; Admiral Arthur Wilson**
Lord Herbert Kitchener	Secretary of State of War	General James Wolfe Murray
David Lloyd George	Chancellor of the Exchequer	
Viscount Edward Grey	Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs	
Sir Arthur Balfour	Member of the Opposition Party (Conservative)	
Sir Maurice Hankey	Secretary of the War Council	
Robert Crewe-Milnes (Earl of Crewe)*	Secretary of State for India	
Viscount Richard Haldane**	Lord Chancellor	
Reginald McKenna***	Home Secretary	
Lewis Harcourt***	Secretary of State for the Colonies	

Source: Hankey, *The Supreme Command 1914-1918*

* Joined Council on 1 December 1914

** Joined Council on 7 January 1915

***Joined Council on 10 March 1915

Table 2**Timeline of the Dardanelles Campaign**

Date	Event
10 August 1914	German cruisers <i>Goeben</i> and <i>Breslau</i> enter the Dardanelles and join the Turkish Navy
29 October 1914	German and Turkish ships raid Russian ports of Odessa and Sevastopol
3 November 1914	British ships bombard Turkish forts at Sedd-el-Bahr
5 November 1914	Great Britain and France declare war on Turkey
25 November 1914	War Council replaces old Cabinet system; Churchill's proposed operation against the Dardanelles is rejected
28 December 1914	Hankey circulates his Boxing Day Memorandum
2 January 1915	Grand Duke Nicholas asks for British assistance against Turkey;
3 January 1915	Churchill asks Admiral Carden to assess practicability of forcing the Dardanelles
5 January 1915	Carden's reply to Churchill changes scope of Dardanelles mission from quick strike to siege operation
11 January 1915	Carden presents his plan of attack to the Admiralty
13 January 1915	War Council approves naval attack on the Dardanelles
28 January 1915	Final approval of Dardanelles attack
19 February 1915	Initial naval assault on the Dardanelles
25 February 1915	Second naval assault
16 March 1915	Carden steps down as commander because of ill health and is replaced by his second-in-command Admiral John de Robeck
18 March 1915	Final naval assault against Dardanelles results in loss of 3 Allied battleships and heavy damage to 2 others; De Robeck refuses to continue attack without assistance of land forces
25 April 1915	British, Australian and New Zealand forces land on Gallipoli peninsula
9 January 1916	Final British troops evacuated from Cape Helles; End of Gallipoli campaign

Appendix 1

Vice Admiral Carden's Plan

Vice Admiral Carden to Admiralty

January 11, 1915.

For First Lord:--

In reply to your telegram of 6th instant.

Reference to Naval Intelligence Department report No. 838, Turkey Coast Defence, 1908.

Possibility of operations:--

(A.) Total reduction of defences at the entrance.

(B.) Clear defences inside of Straits up to and including Kephez Point Battery No. 8.

(C.) Reduction of defences at the Narrows, Chanak.

(D.) Clear passage through minefield, advancing through Narrows, reducing forts above Narrows, and final advance to Marmora.”

Term defences includes permanent, semi-permanent, and field works, also guns or howitzers whose positions are not yet known.

Whilst (A) and (B) are being carried out a battleship force would be employed in demonstration and bombardment of Bulair lines and coast and reduction of battery near Gaba Tepe. Force required, 12 battleships of which 4 fitted with mine bumpers. Three battle-cruisers—2 should be available upon entering Marmora—3 light cruisers, 1 flotilla leader, 16 destroyers, 1 depot repairing ship, 6 submarines, 4 seaplanes, and the *Foudre*, 12 mine-sweepers, including perhaps, 4 fleet sweepers, 1 hospital ship, 6 colliers at Tenedos Island, 2 supply and ammunition ships. The above force allows for casualties.

Details of action:--

Frequent reconnaissance by seaplanes indispensable.

- (A.) Indirect bombardment of forts, reduction completed by direct bombardment at decisive range; torpedo tubes at the entrance and guns commanding minefield destroyed; minefield cleared.
- (B.) Battleships, preceded by mine-sweepers, enter Straits, working way up till position reached from which battery No. 8 can be silenced.

- (C.) Severe bombardment of forts by battle-cruisers from Gaba Tepe spotted from battleships; reduction completed by direct fire at decisive range.
- (D.) Battleships, preceded by sweepers, making way up towards Narrows. Forts 22, 23, 24 first bombarded from Gaba Tepe, spotting for 22 by seaplanes, then direct fire. Sweep minefields in Narrows, the fort at Nagara reduced by direct fire, battle force proceeds to Marmora preceded by mine-sweepers.

Expenditure on ammunition for (C) would be large, but if supplies sufficient, result should be successful. Difficulty as to (B) greatly increased if *Goeben* assisting defence from Nagara. It would, unless submarine attacks successful, necessitate employment of battle-cruisers from Gaba Tepe or direct.

Time required for operations depend greatly on *moral* of enemy under bombardment; garrison largely stiffened by the Germans; also on the weather conditions. Gales now frequent. Might do it all in a month about.

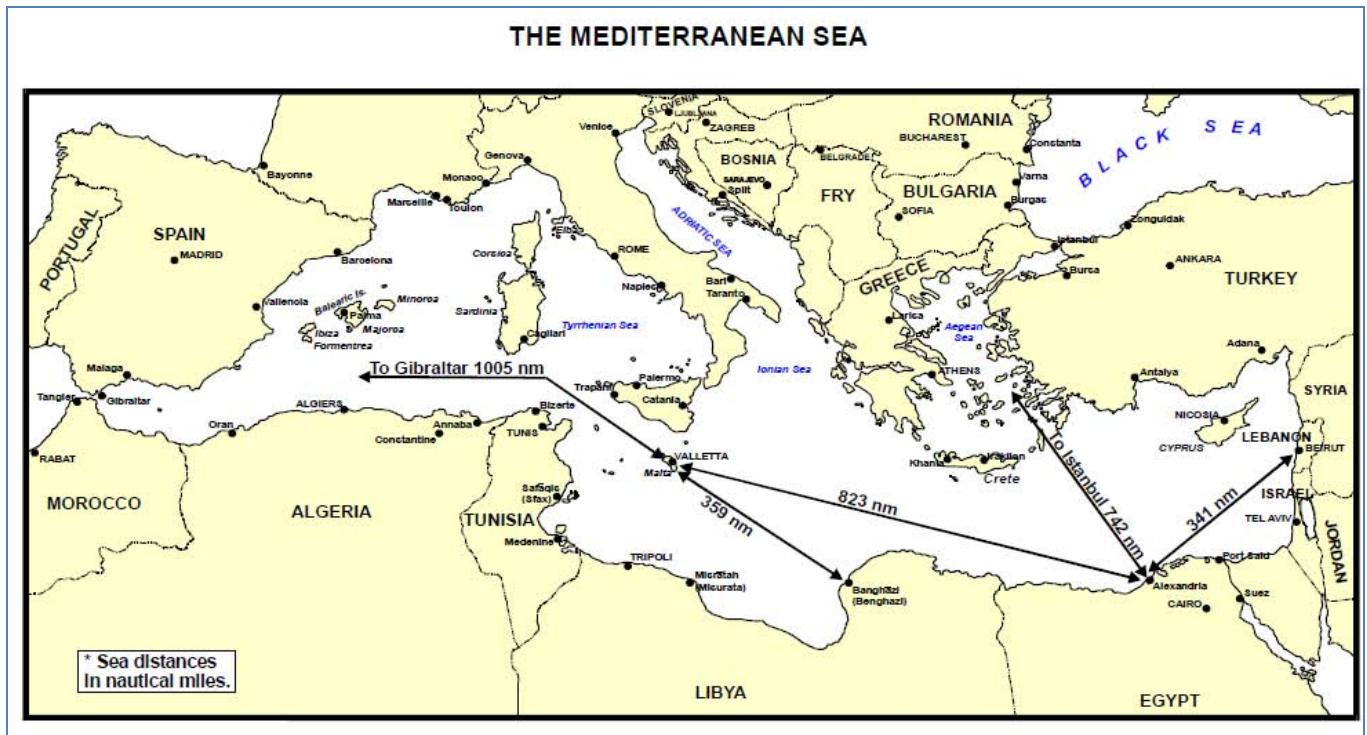
Expenditure of ammunition would be large. Approximate estimate of quantity required being prepared.

Disposition of squadron on completion of operations: Marmora, 2 battle-cruisers, 4 battleships, 3 light cruisers, 1 flotilla leader, 12 torpedo-boat destroyers, 3 submarines, 1 supply and ammunition ship, 4 mine-sweepers collier.

Remainder of force keeping Straits open and covering mine-sweepers completing clearing minefield.⁴⁹

⁴⁹ Churchill, *The World Crisis 1915*, p. 101

Figure 1



Source: *Joint Operational Warfare: Theory & Practice*

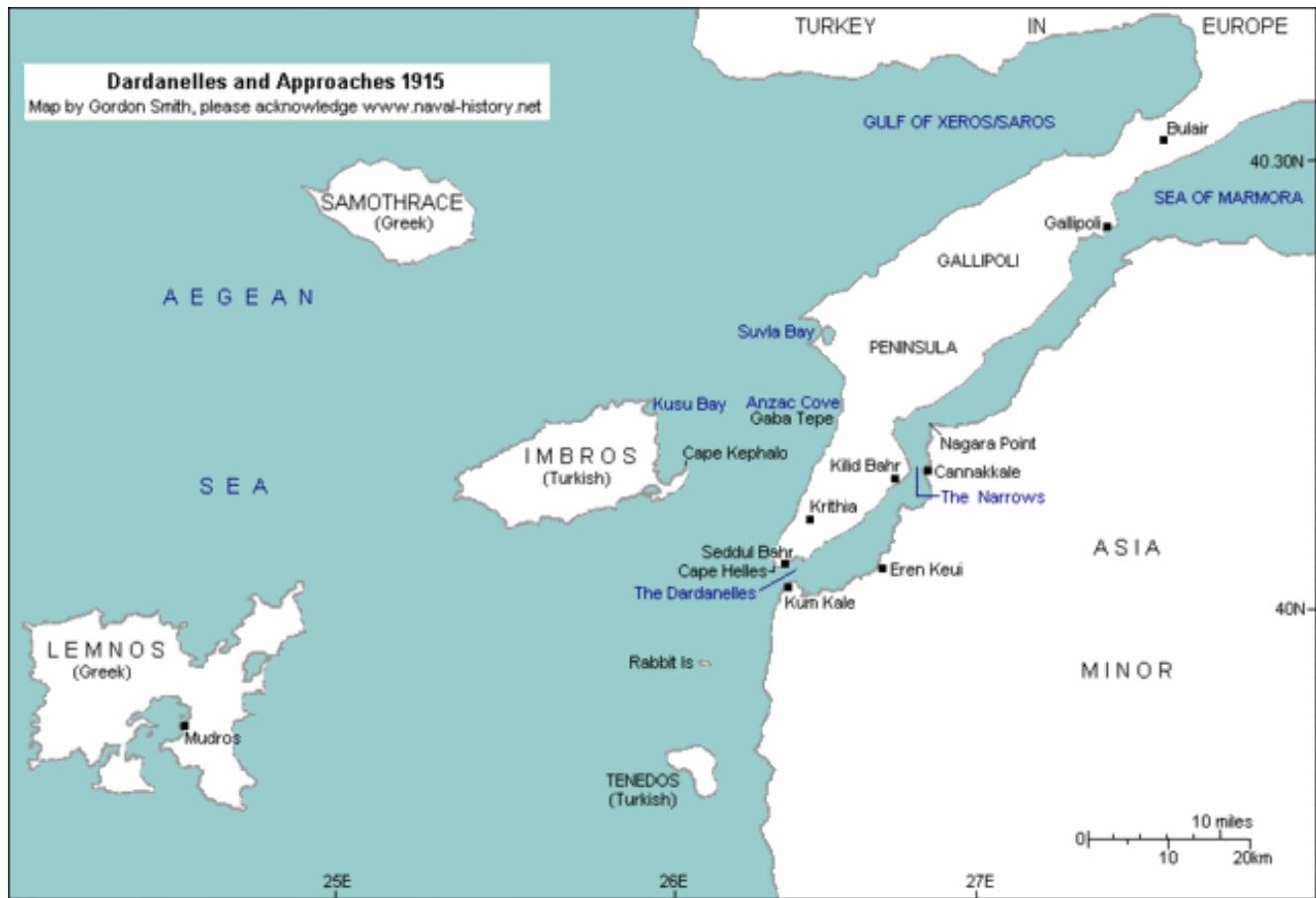
Figure 2

The Aegean Sea



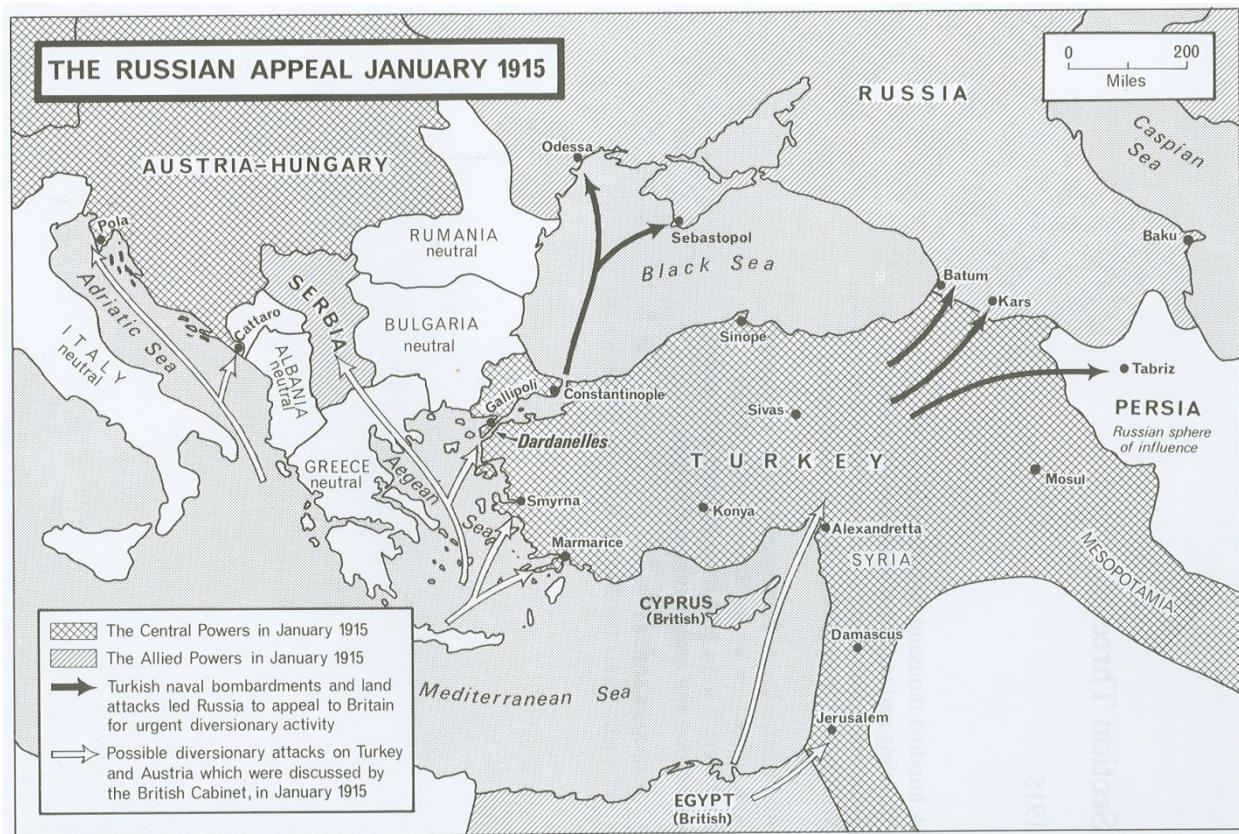
Source: National Geographic

Figure 3



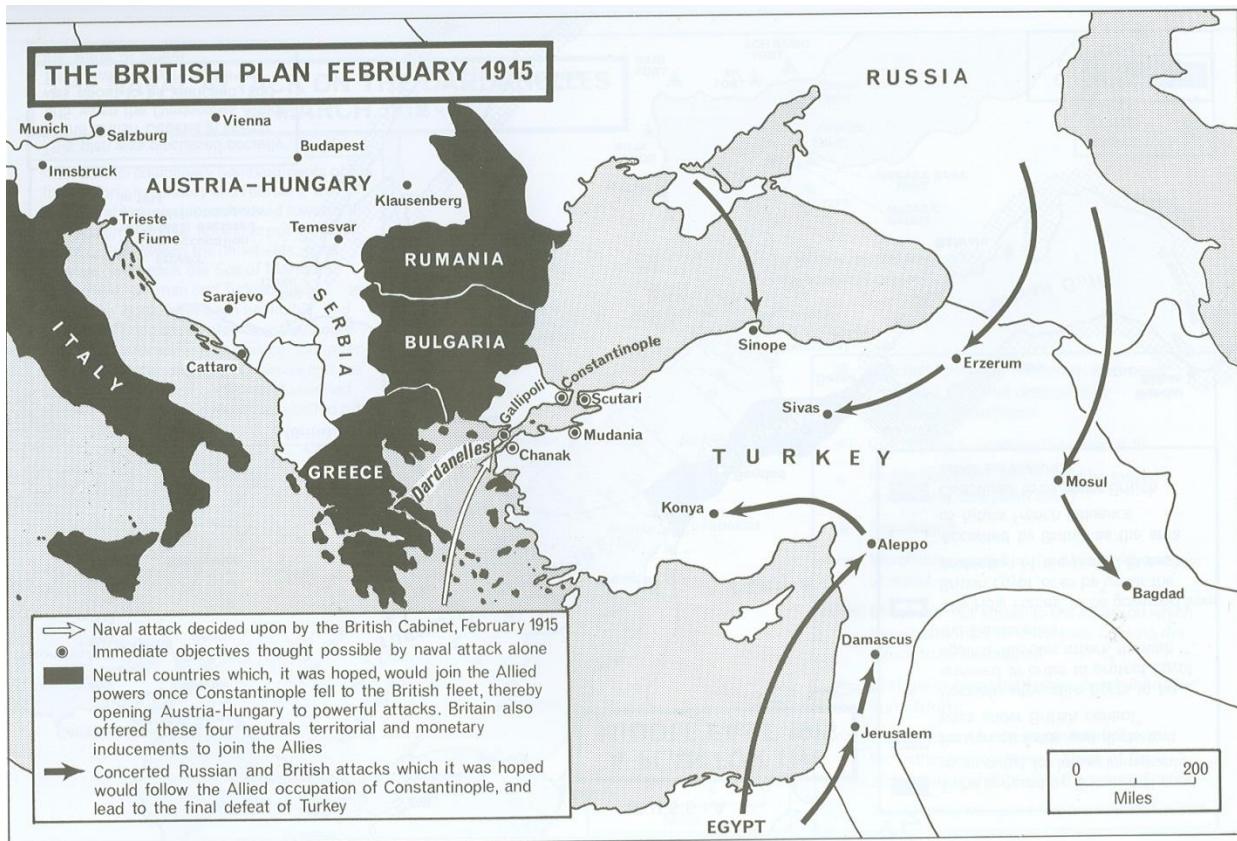
Source: Naval-History.net

Figure 4



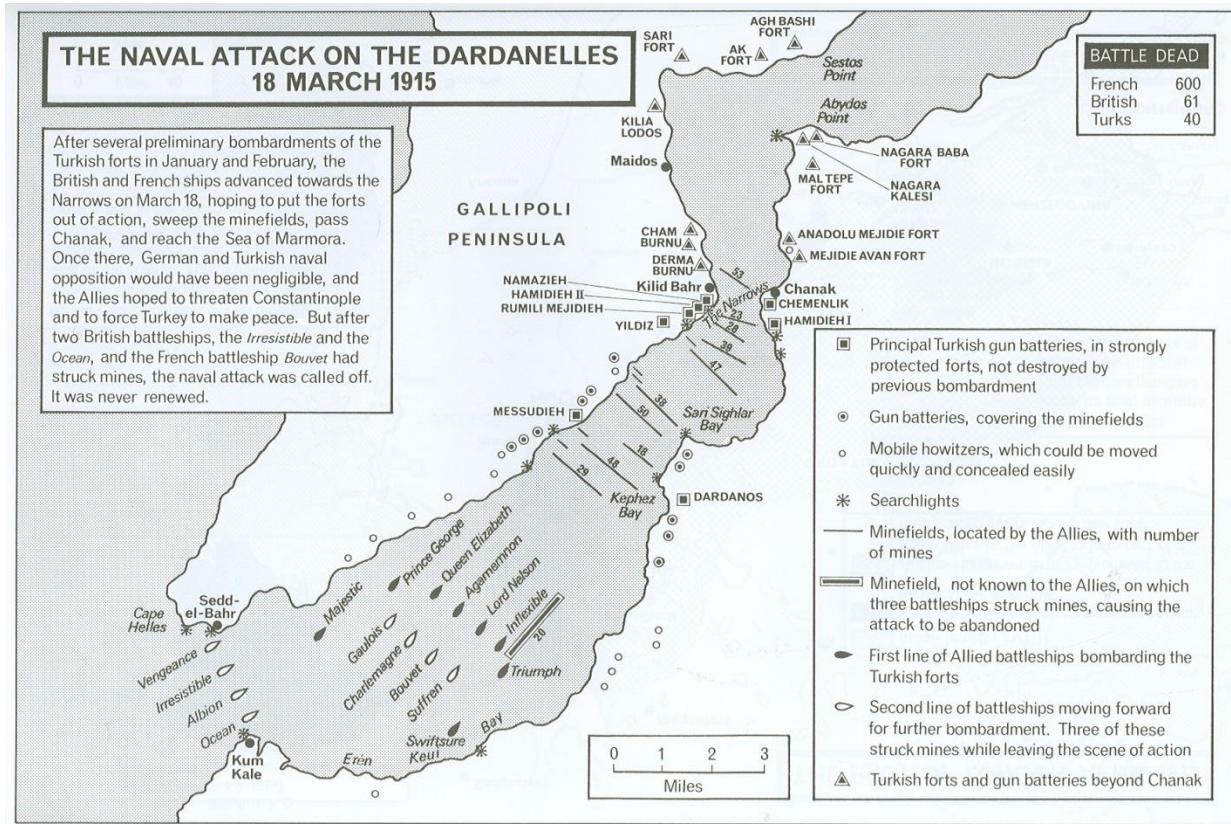
Source: *Routledge Atlas of the First World War*

Figure 5



Source: *Routledge Atlas of the First World War*

Figure 6



Source: *Routledge Atlas of the First World War*

Figure 7
Elements of Campaign Design



Source: *Joint Operational Warfare: Theory & Practice*, p. IX-83

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